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THE MENDACITY OF HISTORY

BY JAMES WESTFALL THOMPSON

IN *Memorials of a Tour in Italy*, Wordsworth speaks of

Those old credulities, to Nature dear,
Shall they no longer bloom upon the stock
Of History?

He is speaking of the fragmentary survivals of ancient cults among the peasantry of Italy. One may, as appositely and with less tenderness, allude to another class of credulities—not to say distortions—of history which still flourish. For, to borrow a phrase from an astonishing sentence of Ruskin, the “splendid mendacity of man” is a thought which is continually driven home upon the student of history. No allusion is now made to the numberless “fictitious narratives,” of which the world has had so recent an example, nor to literary and historical forgeries like those of Annius of Viterbo or Chatterton, but to the credulous beliefs of thousands who possess a considerable knowledge of history concerning well-known and important events. Napoleon’s terse *mot* that “History is a lie agreed upon,” and Walpole’s protest, “Anything but history, for history must be false,” are not without grounds. From antiquity down, the pathway of the reader of history is filled with the pitfalls of popular misbelief. Ages ago Plutarch complained of the difficulty of finding out the truth of anything.

Since the rise of historical criticism in the cloisters of St.-Maur and St.-Germain-des-Prés; in spite of the labors of the great Benedictine scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who did so much to enlarge the glory of scholarship in the age of Louis XIV. and the *Ancien Régime*; in spite of the wondrous work done by the Bollandists and those Italian prodigies of learning, Mansi and Muratori; in spite of the penetrating research of a long line of patient investi-

gators in Europe and America who have applied the principles of historical criticism so inspiringly taught by Ranke—men like Waitz, Sybel, Dahlmann, Scheffer-Boichorst, Holder-Egger in Germany; like Monod, Lavissee, Havet, and Coulanges in France; like Stubbs and Creighton in England, or the late Professor E. G. Bourne here in the United States—in spite of the labors of such as these, the field of history is still full of false and erroneous ideas.

“A fact is neither more certain nor more probable for being found in a great number of new authors, who have copied it one from the other,” was wisely observed by the old Abbé Fleury long ago. Yet each succeeding generation perpetuates the errors of its predecessor. Every teacher of history knows how persistent and broadcast is the spread of false historical ideas. A considerable portion of the time of every teacher has to be spent in the uprooting of mistaken notions which have found lodgment in the minds of his students. And the discouraging feature of such education is that from generation unto generation of college classes, these errors are to be found, so that the ground has to be cleared anew each year.

Modern scholarship has revolutionized the history of the persecution of Christianity by the Roman government and exploded the old ideas as to the origin and use of the catacombs. Yet the false or exaggerated beliefs of uncritical and prejudiced writers and the sentimental conceptions of “historical” novelists still persist with almost unabated vigor in the popular mind.

The same observation holds with reference to the relations of the German barbarian nations to the Roman Empire. The all-too-prevalent belief that the Germanic movement was a vast flood of barbarism that engulfed the ancient world has little basis in reality. The Great Migration—what the Germans have called the *Völkerwanderung*, was not an inundation. If one wishes to use the metaphor of flowing water in illustration of it, the barbarian invasion, so called, was rather an infiltration into the Roman Empire, by the gradual seeping in of Germanic peoples and barbarian influences. The Migration filled five centuries of history and was a slow and gradual process, not a huge *débâcle*. The Germans entered the empire as settlers in the waste lands, as soldiers, for Rome for centuries recruited its legions from the peoples in the wilderness east

of the Rhine and north of the Danube, as artisans, as slaves who had been captured in war. But warfare was the exception, not the rule, along the Rhine-Danube frontier. The Roman Empire declined far less from the shock of invasion than from the operation of economic and social forces within it.

The belief that the Germans were actuated by violent hostility to the Roman Empire and destroyed it in their savage wrath is a creation of the seventeenth century and is due to La Fontaine. The actual germ of La Fontaine's idea was a Spanish book, written in 1529 by Antonio Guevara, a Spanish bishop. It is a romance of the days of Marcus Aurelius, which Herberay, the Seigneur d'Essars, translated into French in 1576 under the title *L'Horloge des Princes avec le très renommé livre Marc-Aurèle*. This book, which is in no sense a work of history—was the source of La Fontaine's famous "Paysan du Danube," an epic fragment filled with the sentimentalism that so characterizes the poetry of the great fabulist. Here for the first time the type of the German enemy of Rome appears.

From La Fontaine, this new type of German passed into the thought of Europe, first into its literature, then with Montesquieu into its history. The very history of the word Gothicism is a commentary upon the historical misapprehensions of the eighteenth century. The epithet "Vandalism" was coined by Gregoire during the French Revolution. Then came the Romantic movement which popularized the new interpretation of the Germanic migration, most of all Byron. How many English readers' idea of the relation of the Germans to Rome has been formed upon the famous stanzas which portray the dying gladiator?

The great fables of medieval history, like the legend of Pope Joan; the tale that Gregory the Great destroyed the Palatine Library of the Cæsars; the burning of the Alexandrian library by Omar; the spurious Donation of Constantine; the legend—of modern origin, singularly enough—that medieval Europe believed that the world would come to an end in the year 1000; the romantic story of Blondel the minstrel, and the captivity of Richard Cœur de Lion; the story that the preaching of Peter the Hermit fired Europe in the First Crusade; the legend of William Tell; the devotion of Eustache de St.-Pierre during the siege of Calais in 1347—all these beliefs have long since been disproved.

The legend of Pope Joan is first alluded to in a chronicle written by Jean de Mailly, a Dominican of Auxerre about 1250. The first historian who attacked the fable was Blondel in the seventeenth century, and Döllinger has effectually disposed of it.

The statement that Gregory the Great destroyed the Palatine Library of the Cæsars, founded by Augustus—a statement which Draper had the hardihood to repeat as late as 1861, is first met with in the *Polycratica* of John of Salisbury, who died in 1180, while Gregory I. died in 604. Even Gibbon, who was not partial to churchmen, declared that “the evidence of his destructive rage is doubtful and recent.”

There were two Alexandrian libraries. The first, which was founded by the Ptolemies, and is said to have contained 700,000 rolls of manuscript, perished in the conflagration of the city when Cæsar attacked the fleet of Antony and Cleopatra in the roadstead of Alexandria in 47 B.C. The fate of the second collection, which was partly of pagan, partly of Christian origin, is almost as much shrouded in obscurity as that of the Palatine Library. It may have been destroyed during the great riot between the orthodox and Arian factions in 389, when the Serapeum, which is said to have housed it, was burned. It can hardly have had the wasting fate that perhaps befell its Roman rival, and it is certain that Omar’s iconoclasm is a myth. With Gibbon’s judgment modern historical scholarship concurs.

“The solitary report of a stranger who wrote at the end of six hundred years in the confines of Media is over-balanced by the silence of two annalists of a more early date, both Christians, both natives of Egypt, and the most ancient of whom, the patriarch Eutychius, has amply described the conquest of Alexandria.”

The legend of the year 1000 concerning the termination of the world is of particular interest because it is of very late formation. There is no such thought in the chroniclers who lived at the time when this terror is said to have obtained. Contemporary annalists from the year 975 to 1050, Italian, German, French, English, all are silent upon this point. The private life of the best-known persons of this epoch gives no indication. There is not the least allusion to the terrors of the year 1000 in any biography of the time. Even the biographer of Robert the Pious of France, whose

reign (997–1031) coincides with the memorable date of the year 1000, is silent. Michelet and his school make much of the preamble of charters and public acts of the time. But it is important to remark that these formulas, *Mundi termino appropinquante*, etc., were not invented in the tenth century, but had been common legal usages in various parts of France for centuries past in the execution of wills and similar documents. All the general information which we have relative to the last years of the tenth century demonstrates that Europe had no anticipation of the end of all things. On the contrary, in the ten years which immediately precede the year 1000, the councils of the Church were numerous, and there is no allusion to the alleged event in the findings of any one of them.

That favorite romance of our childhood, the story of the rescue of Richard Cœur de Lion, a hero dear to every reader of Scott's *Talisman*, rests on as infirm a basis. No chronicler of the time of Richard, or until four centuries later, speaks of the incident. The earliest mention is in a manuscript of the late fourteenth century. From this source the tale was first given currency in print by Fauchet, an antiquary of the time of Henry IV., in 1610. Blondel slept in Fauchet's dusty folio until 1705, when a clever French authoress, Mlle. Lhéritier de Villandon, published *La tour ténébreuse*, a romantic novel, in which she embellished Fauchet's source with inventions of her own.

It was in this novel that Sédaine found the theme of his opera, "Richard Cœur de Lion," first presented on April 21, 1784. The opera of Sédaine and the music of Gretry made the tale popular. Goldsmith is the first historian—if he may be so styled—who mentions the incident as a fact, though Wharton had independently come upon the account in Fauchet and given it currency. From these pages the story of Blondel passed into greater historical works like Mill's *History of the Crusades*, Michaud's *Histoire des Croisades*, Raumer's *Geschichte der Hohenstaufen*, and Martin's *Histoire de France*.

As far back as the middle of the eighteenth century Fleury wrote:

For more than a century we have been disillusioned about the Crusades, and they are no more spoken of as a war against the Infidel, except in the writings of some authors more zealous than intelligent, and in the allusions of poets when they wish to flatter princes. Men of sense, enlightened by

experience of the past and understanding the causes, clearly see that in these enterprises there was more to be lost than to be won, and more for the temporal than for the spiritual.

Yet an immense amount of erroneous belief still persists as to the Crusades, although no well-informed person to-day believes, or should believe, that the preaching of Peter the Hermit caused the First Crusade. Peter never had visited Jerusalem as claimed; his career was stained with violence and fraud; he was a poltroon and a charlatan. Modern historical research has left him a very dingy halo.

As to William Tell, only the most credulous of Swiss tourists believe in him. The story first appears in the sixteenth century. There is no record of a Gessler among the Hapsburg bailiffs. Moreover, the essential features of the legend are common to Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Holstein, the Middle Rhine, and England. The resemblance of the story to the narrative of the twelfth-century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus is striking.

The famous episode recorded by Froissart, of how Eustache de St.-Pierre and his devoted townsmen saved Calais from the wrath of Edward III. must also be consigned to the limbo of fable. The French scholar Bréquigny, in the eighteenth century, discovered in the archives of London evidence to prove that he was an English partisan and in receipt of an English stipend.

Modern history, in like manner, has been purged by the fire of historical criticism. The universal belief of the Protestant world of the sixteenth century that the Massacre of St. Bartholomew was premeditated is without foundation. The Grand Design of Henry IV. was a figment of the dotard brain of the Duke of Sully; the genuineness of the memoirs of Richelieu and Père Joseph is seriously doubted, and the memoirs of Talleyrand are a fabrication. Tilly was not responsible for the firing of Magdeburg and the awful destruction that ensued. Louis XIV. never used the famous words, "*Il n'y a plus de Pyrénées.*" The Spanish ambassador Castil dos Rios said something like it, and La Beaumelle, later, attributed it to the King. Even Voltaire, although Madame Deffand cast upon him the reproach of inventing history, was not deceived by this tale.

The epoch of the French Revolution, perhaps more than any other period of history, teems with popular misappre-

hension. The traditional belief as to the abuses obtaining in the Bastille is a myth; *lettres de cachet* (writs of arbitrary arrest) were not issued in blank, and the monstrous abuse of police power for which the government of the *Ancien Régime* has so often been arraigned was not practised, in point of fact; the *Pacte de Famine*—the reputed attempt of certain ministers of the crown under Louis XV. to “corner” the wheat supply of France in the hard times immediately prevailing before the Revolution—is a bubble of the imagination; the famous Last Night of the Girondists during the Reign of Terror is a creation of fiction; the Terror government never proscribed Christian worship in the churches of France, or abolished Christianity. Cambronne did not utter the famous phrase, “*La garde meurt et ne se rend pas*” at Waterloo, although history attributes it to him and it is graven on the pedestal of his statue. M. Henri Houssaye’s interesting little book, *L’Histoire d’un mot célèbre*, disproves it, and Cambronne himself ever denied it. The resounding word was coined by a happy phrase-maker, a newspaper man of Paris named Rougemont, on the very evening of the battle, and was printed in *L’Indépendant* on the following day.

The erroneous ideas prevailing with reference to the history of the Bastille are based exclusively upon three books, no one of which is worthy of the least credence: the *Inquisition Française ou Histoire de la Bastille* (1715), by Constantin de Renneville, the *Mémoires de Latude* (1790), and the *Mémoires sur la Bastille* of Linquet (1783). Of these three authors, the first was an agent of the French Government in Holland, who sold secrets of state, was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death, but whose sentence was commuted to imprisonment in the Bastille by Chamillart, the French Minister. He was set at liberty after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and took refuge in England, where he wrote five huge volumes full of lies and calumnies, not only with reference to the Bastille, but also with reference to the Court and all France. His statements have been refuted, page after page, by the witness of original documents. As for Latude, he was a lunatic, and Linquet was an unprincipled journalist, an ex-advocate who had been disbarred.

The truth about this famous place of imprisonment in the eighteenth century is quite different from what is usu-

ally believed. The Government did not use it as a place for criminals, and its inmates were confined there for reasons of state interest only. It was no dishonor to be imprisoned there. In fact, as the *Mémoires* of Madame de Staël show, imprisonment in it was not altogether a misfortune, for the victim became a nine days' hero and was sure of pleasant company, for the Bastille was a prison reserved for members of the aristocracy, the clergy, and high-class bourgeoisie. Upon its registers are to be found some of the greatest names of France, princes of the blood, cardinals of the church, marshals, illustrious writers.

The use of torture had been abolished in the Bastille in the seventeenth century, and when it was captured in 1789 by the mob no vestige of its employment was found. The government was exceedingly indulgent, allowing prisoners to have their own servants with them, whose keep it not only paid for, but even paid their wages. The relatives of a prisoner were sometimes permitted to stay with him in order to lighten his confinement. In 1693 Madame LaFontaine, thanks to the compassion of the governor, was permitted to have her husband and a servant with her.

The appropriation for the care of the prisoners was most generous, and graduated according to their social scale. For example, the governor received five livres per diem for a bourgeois, fifteen for councilor of Parlement, twenty-four for a general of the army, thirty-six for a marshal of France. When Cardinal Rohan was imprisoned there for his part in the famous affair of the Diamond Necklace, the governor was allowed one hundred and twenty francs per diem for his upkeep. The very fact that such a schedule existed is proof positive as to the class of prisoners. As to the daily fare, it is safe to say there was no prison like it in Europe. Renneville, although he disparages the *Ancien Régime*, admits that he had champagne and burgundy to drink, and hare and lobster to eat. Even Linguet, in spite of his wish to portray the suffering of the inmates of the Bastille, admits that the daily fare was good and abundant. Every morning the *chef* presented the *menu* to the prisoners for their approval. Finally the king clothed those prisoners who were too poor to clothe themselves, and they wore no prison uniform. We read of dressing-gowns trimmed with furs, of colored breeches, of silk doublets, of shirts that cost more than forty francs of our money,

and good linen handkerchiefs. The *commissaire* was officially instructed to consult the taste of each prisoner as to the color, the cut, and the fashion preferred. The government even furnished pocket-money and tobacco to indigent prisoners. In their rooms the prisoners used to have pets of all kinds—cats, birds, dogs—and sometimes used to get up theatricals or musical entertainments among themselves. If a prisoner was ill, he was furnished free medical attention, or could have his private physician, if he preferred. One day when the Cardinal Dubois was examining the report of the governor, he remarked upon the unusual quantity of lavender allowed the prisoners, to which the Regent replied: "It is their sole distraction. Don't take it away from them."

During the whole reign of Louis XVI. the famous prison did not average more than sixteen prisoners a year, and most of them were only incarcerated a few days. From 1783 to 1789 the Bastille was so nearly empty that the government seriously considered closing it entirely. From January 1, 1789, to July 14, but one prisoner was admitted.

When Delauney surrendered at discretion on the famous day, the wild fury of the mob endeavored to wreck the structure within and without. The *Moniteur* describes how "*Un corselet de fer inventé pour rétenir un homme par toutes les articulations et le fixer dans une immobilité éternelle*" horrified the crowd, when as a matter of fact what the eyes of the maddened populace really saw was nothing but the corselet belonging to a suit of medieval armor that had once belonged to a collection of ancient arms in the Bastille. Likewise we are told of a machine "*non moins destructive, qui fut exposée au grand jour, mais personne ne put en deviner ni le nom, ni l'usage direct.*" As a matter of fact, the "fearful contrivance" was a little wooden printing-press that had once belonged to a prisoner named Lenormand, and had been seized by the government as evidence? Finally, at the bottom of one of the bastions, the crowd found the bones of some suicides which had been interred there, as was natural, since the law of the church forbade their interment in consecrated ground. But these remains were not so regarded by the excited populace of Paris. The Abbé Fauchet pronounced an oration upon these unknown "victims" of Bourbon tyranny, and Mir-

abeau uttered the terrible words: "*Les ministres ont manqué de prévoyance. Ils ont oublié de manger les os!*"

The romantic aura hovering around the history of the Girondists must be considered as for ever annihilated since the appearance of M. Edmond Biré's *La Légende des Girondins*.

It was inevitable that fiction should seize upon their history. In 1831 Charles Nodier published the *Dernier Banquet des Girondins*, a work of pure imagination, but full of passion and flaming eloquence, which founded the legend of the banquet. Contemporary memoirs make no allusion to it.

Honoré Ricuffe, the author of the *Mémoires d'un Détenu*, was imprisoned with Vergniaud, Brissot, and others, and has left us a circumstantial account of their last hours. There is not a word in his writings of the alleged banquet of the Girondists. There is no trace of it in the Revolutionary newspapers. Sixteen years later the drama further distorted history. On August 3, 1847, the famous play, *Le Chevalier de la Maison-Rouge*, of Alexandre Dumas, appeared, in which the last banquet is the climax of the play.

In the same year both Louis Blanc and Michelet published the first volumes of their respective histories of the French Revolution. Each, in writing of the Girondists, followed the tradition, Michelet in particular, who was the first to give the authentic word to the Last Banquet, which really has no place outside of the novel of Charles Nodier.

Finally the wreath of honor and the crown of martyrdom were conferred upon the Girondists by Lamartine in his famous *Histoire des Girondins*. As an example of how history should not be written, these eight volumes are classic. Errors of fact abound; contradictions are to be met with upon almost every page; the Girondist leaders are cast in heroic mold and represented as a sacrifice to the implacable Montagnards. The work is a panegyric abounding in passages of dithyrambic intensity, in word pictures of wondrous color and of such marvelous eloquence that the reader is so enthralled that he fails to see the historical errors and the intense partisanship of Lamartine.

The revolution of 1848 confirmed the Girondist legend in the popular imagination. When the Orleanist monarchy was overthrown, a new republic came into being with the

“Chant des Girondins” as its “Marseillaise.” The striking popularity which Lamartine at this moment enjoyed metamorphosed the leaders of the Girondist party into figures of heroic proportions. The press, the university, and every public orator lauded their deeds. Ponsard, on the stage of the *Théâtre* transformed the Girondists’ leaders into the heroes of Corneille, and made of Vergniaud a new Cid.

Thus we see that the liberal democratic school—the Revolutionists of 1830 and 1848, historians, dramatists, and novel-writers of the Romantic school—had all united to erect the memory of the Girondists into a cult. Even monarchist historians of the Second Empire, like Barante and Mortimer-Ternaux, were deceived into believing the legend to be actual history, and drew their interpretation of the course of the Girondists from the pages of Michelet and Louis Blanc.

Lamartine tells us that he had seen with his own eyes the inscriptions written upon the walls of their prison; that he had touched with his own hands letters written by the hand of Vergniaud and with his blood. Michelet also saw these, unless perchance he was content to copy Lamartine. But the tradition which inspired Lamartine and Michelet was completely in error. Neither Vergniaud nor any of the Girondists were imprisoned in the Carmes immediately before their appearance before the Revolutionary tribunal. Grannier de Cassagnac has traced the itinerary of twenty-one of them in detail through the prisons of Paris, and their course is clearly to be followed in the official registers of the prisons. All were imprisoned in the Conciergerie, the Abbaye, La Grande Force, or the Luxembourg. Not a single prison register records the incarceration of any Girondist in the prison of the Carmes, and the records of this prison make no mention of them there. The famous inscriptions in the Carmes are, therefore, not to be attributed to Vergniaud and his fellows.

The “*Potius mori quam foedari*,” that courageous Breton motto of the Middle Ages, attributed to Vergniaud and written “*avec du sang*,” according to Lamartine, is actually written in ink, which has reddened through oxidation. The extract from a passage of the *Imitation of Christ*, in which Lamartine claimed to recognize the handwriting of the Abbé Fauchet, is simply an inscription painted upon a board. Undoubtedly it was a possession

of one of the sisters who had formerly occupied the convent.

We come now to the tradition of the Last Banquet. "Their last night," says Thiers, "was sublime." Lamartine in his turn lavishes upon this scene all the colors of his incomparable imagination. Michelet is more restrained in his description, but he, like Lamartine, is writing romance and not history. In one point he is curiously particular. He assures us that the dinner was provided by a friend, whose identity is revealed by Lamartine and Charles Nodier. He was Baileull, a colleague of the Girondists in the Legislative Assembly, who was proscribed with them, but escaped death. But Baileull was imprisoned from October 9, 1793, to August 8, 1794. Obviously, he could not have been able, on October 30, 1793 to provide his friends with the repast which they are reputed to have enjoyed. As Grannier de Cassagnac truthfully observes: "This banquet, these wines, these flowers, these candles, these speeches, everything, in short, is purely and simply a fable."

If the reader who has followed thus far wishes to pursue the thread of this discourse, let him read M. Anatole Le Braz's charming study upon Châteaubriand entitled *Au pays d'exil de Châteaubriand*. M. Le Braz has attacked the question of Châteaubriand's exile in England, and the reader will find that in his life there, as Châteaubriand has written it, there is more of *Dichtung* than of *Wahrheit*.

The mists of time transfigure. It is the nature of the human heart to weave traditions and legends around men and events. For, like Wordsworth's "Reaper," we all of us at times find charm in

Old unhappy far-off things,
And battles long ago.

And yet, is there not as great a charm in that exquisite presentation of the truth which is, as Fustel de Coulanges finely said, the chastity of history? "Human affairs," said Richter, "are neither to be laughed at nor wept over, but to be understood."

JAMES WESTFALL THOMPSON.